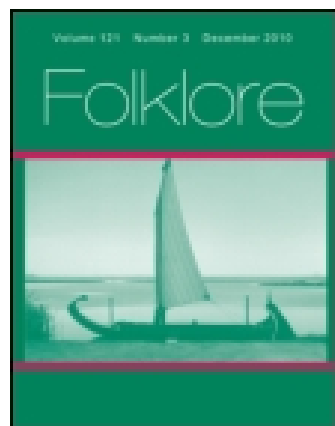


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Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives

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Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives. By Maria Tatar. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004. 247 pp. £10.95 (pbk). ISBN 0-691-12738-2

Secrets Beyond the Door traces the history of Charles Perrault's *Barbe-bleue* (1697) in the English-speaking world. As such it is less a work about folklore than a piece of literary criticism that makes frequent reference to folklore. Although Tatar covers genres as diverse as opera and photography, the work mainly concentrates on films of the 1940s and on twentieth-century literature, with a particular focus on women's contributions.

The book is at its best when talking about film. Tatar's beautiful descriptions and insightful analysis bring a welcome folkloric perspective to film studies. As she herself points out, prior film critics who have studied the same set of films have recognised the key Bluebeard motifs, without ever realising their origin in and debt to folk tradition.

The discussion of other forms of popular culture is less complete, as is to be expected with a corpus as vast as modern western popular culture. Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905), for example, was an extraordinarily popular novel by a woman writer. Its protagonist was the original masked hero with an unassuming alter-ego, and the work lies at the foundation of the entire masked superhero genre. At a climactic moment, the hero's wife Marguerite is depicted as follows:

A sudden, burning, childish curiosity seized her to have a peep at Sir Percy's sanctum ... Gently, on tip-toe, she cross the landing and, like Blue Beard's wife, trembling half with excitement and wonder, she paused a moment on the threshold, strangely perturbed and irresolute (p. 153 of the 2002 Modern Library edition).

And "she turned away from this strange Blue Beard's chamber, which she had entered, and which she did not understand" (p. 155). In this case, Bluebeard's alter-ego is good rather than evil, but that only bolsters the point Tatar makes on page 85. Regarding *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*, she writes:

Charlotte Brontë and Daphne du Maurier reconfigure the folklore plot to create wives whose curiosity leads to collusion rather than detection. They nonetheless reinvigorate the genre, for the stories they produce cry out for de-mythification even as they continue to produce copies of themselves.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, several works of unclear relevance are included. Tatar presents only one photographer, Cindy Sherman; the discussion is interesting, but without any contextualisation of the genre of photography it is difficult to understand how Sherman is significant. Equally, calling *The Piano* (1993) a "rescripting of 'Bluebeard'" (p. 125) is rather strong. Bluebeard is obviously a useful analytical tool for evaluating the film, but claiming it is a version of Bluebeard is counterproductive, at least in the absence of a more convincing case being made. See, for example, the case for *Lolita* on pages 154–5.

Tatar's credentials as a scholar of European folktales are impeccable, and her knowledge and insight are a welcome model for how folklorists can bring a historical perspective and folkloristic methodology to the study of contemporary popular culture. Her discussion of *Jane Eyre*, for instance, takes into consideration the book's basis in tradition (Jane as a Cinderella figure), as well as its use of tradition (Jane's fondness for stories). Tatar also treats the transition from folklore to literature to popular culture in the form of the 1944 film very well.

Tatar's familiarity with the tradition leads her to gloss over some of the key steps in her argument. She says several times that Bluebeard (ATU 312) is not as familiar as the "canonical" folktales, but never defines what that canon is, or how she arrives at that conclusion. It is clear from her other publications that she speaks with authority on this topic, but this book itself suggests a counter-argument: an appendix with versions from

Perrault, the Grimms, and English, Italian, and American folk tradition; a chapter on illustrations including Crane, Doré, Nielsen, Rackham, and others; specific imagery and intertextual references in works as diverse as Stephen King's *The Shining* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. One wonders how an "unfamiliar" tale could be so widespread!

When speaking of the folktale itself, she distinguishes it from the bulk of other folktales because it begins, rather than ends, with a wedding. As she explains, the tale is about marriage and its anxieties. The author of *Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* has missed an excellent opportunity to make the point about the traditional audience for such a tale. As a folktale aimed at adults, rather than children, it is no wonder that the story has not been included in the infantilised modern folktale canon, while at the same time unsurprising that the tale type should continue to resonate in adult fiction.

The appendix, entitled "Cultural Variants of Bluebeard," contains eleven different versions of the folktale. It is a good collection of those versions that would have been known to an English-speaking audience in the early twentieth century, along with a few less accessible pieces. It is such a good collection, in fact, that it would be marketable as a booklet in its own right, especially if combined with the illustrations.

To move beyond the very minor critiques listed above, this book is a model for the way folklore scholarship needs to progress in the future. Tatar makes a strong case that folklore is both relevant and useful to other academic disciplines, and offers an illustration in the figure of Bluebeard's wife. She provides a background to her tale-type in both literary and oral tradition in a way that a scholar of film would not easily be able to do, and as she traces the pattern she shows that one of our own discipline's assumptions—that folktales are no longer a part of western tradition except as conscious literary re-tellings—is wrong.

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Wandering Spirits: Chen Shiyuan's *Encyclopedia of Dreams*. Translated and annotated by Richard E. Strassberg. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. xx + 289 pp. \$26.95 (hbk). ISBN 978-0-520-25294-3

For anyone interested in knowing what the traditional concepts of Chinese (and by extension East Asian) dream interpretation are, this work is clearly the place to begin. Richard E. Strassberg has done the scholarly community a great service. *Wandering Spirits* is a meticulous annotated translation of a major work, the *Mengzhan yizhi* [*Lofty Principles of Dream Interpretation*] of 1562, by the Chinese scholar and retired bureaucrat Chen Shiyuan (1516–95).

The translator's introductory chapter traces the history of the principles and philosophy underlying Chinese dream interpretation, incorporating Taoist, Buddhist, and generic Chinese ideas. The introduction also provides a biography of the life of Chen Shiyuan and his antecedents, and discusses how the work came to be written and how a twenty-first-century reader should understand it.

The translated text itself is divided into two sections, called the Inner Chapters and the Outer Chapters, and is preceded by Chen's own preface to the *Mengzhan yizhi*. The ten Inner Chapters are essentially a discussion of the principles of dream interpretation themselves, while the twenty Outer Chapters are a statement and interpretation of a range of dream motifs. Both of these sections would be of great comparative interest to the European folklorist.